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ABSTRACT

The term "urban education" generally refers to that education provided in inner-city schools for mainly poor and minority students. Although billions of dollars have been spent on special programs to upgrade the achievement levels of such students, urban education must be regarded as a failure, for it has left its participants without the reading, writing, listening, math, and science skills necessary for access to higher education or employment. Discrimination is evident throughout urban schools, and is shown by, or aggravated by, faulty planning, lack of interagency planning, outdated teacher and administrator training, piecemeal reform, the shortcomings of community control, and racist attitudes toward intelligence tests. Urban education can work, however, if positive attitudes and respect for diversity are coupled with the following strategies for change: coordinated planning, updated management systems, audiovisual aids, self-instructional centers, academic performance contracting for teachers, exposing youngsters to educational and cultural activities, changes in IQ testing and teacher training, curriculum reform, legal action, and self-help. (RDN)

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Urban Education: Strategies for Change

by Wanda E. Gill

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This paper purports to define urban education, discuss commonly agreed upon problems and indicate strategies for change.

I. What is urban education?

Urban education describes the prospects of learning for inner city children. It delves into the problems associated with providing quality education for poor and minority children. It is intrinsically tied to the social, political and economic forces that affect the inner cities. Urban education includes those economic realities of minorities who are trapped within the system. The 1970 national census of sixty seven metropolitan areas with populations of 500,000 or more indicated that one quarter of these areas is predominantly black. Eleven major cities are more than 40% black and four have black majorities.[1]

Three quarters of all Americans live in metropolitan areas; one third live in inner cities.[2] The combined population of New York City, Chicago, Los Angeles, Philadelphia and Detroit is greater than the combined population of nineteen of the smallest states of the nation.[3] These large cities offer the most dramatic example of the disaster of urban education.

The scope and statistical reports on urban education fail to convey the individual tragedies that help describe the effect. In Manchild of the Promised Land, Claude Brown describes the education system he was a part of.[4]

[1]Leslie Silverman, Students and Schools (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Printing Office, 1979), p.4.

[2]Ibid, p.5.

[3]Ibid, p.4.

[4]Claude Brown, Manchild in the Promised Land (New York: Macmillan, 1965), pp. 35-57.

Student performance on math, reading, science and social studies achievement tests indicate that black and Hispanic students performed below the national means in all five learning areas.[1] Reading scores for black students in the Northeast, Central, Western and Southeast regions were significantly lower than scores for whites, with scores for thirteen and seventeen year olds falling even lower than the already great gap at age nine.[2]

In terms of youth employment (described as 16-24 year olds) by educational attainment, 38% of black high school dropouts do not have jobs compared to 24% white and 25% Hispanic high school dropouts. The white youth with 1-3 years of college has an 8% unemployment rate compared to figures of 28% for black and 14% for Hispanics with 1-3 years of college.[3] Therefore, the job possibilities of the urban youngster are slim.

In terms of economic participation, whites averaged almost $5 more weekly than minorities in 1978. Put another way, blacks' salary was 80 percent of whites'.[4] What these statistics fail to cite is unemployment numbers for whites and minorities. These comparisons are based on those working at different educational levels.

The real tragedy of urban education is the unacceptance of the classroom reality by most Americans. Most people get as far as their newspaper into the classroom. They read of isolated incidents of violence. A student is raped on a stairwell; a teacher is assaulted in a corridor; a student is shot in school. They read, without much overt concern, yet alone outrage of the Washington, D.C. students' Scholastic Aptitude Test scores falling 100 points below the national average.[5] To this population of passive observers,

[1]Silverman, 27.

[2]Ibid, pp. 28-29.

[3]W. Vance Grant and George C. Lind, Digest of Education (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1979), p.17.

[4]Nancy B. Dearman and Valena White Plisko, The Condition of Education, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1979), p.215.

[5]Washington Post, 1979.

nothing can or will be done to improve urban schools.

Urban education can work. There are documented cases of children who learn despite deprivation. Some teachers are able to relate well to their students. They are able to instill a thirst for knowledge and a love of learning. This new frontier must be met with positive attitudes and respect for diversity coupled with real long and short term strategies for change from the state school boards and administrators who dictate policy all the way down to the classroom teachers.

II. Problem: Urban Education: The Failure

Most public schools in America do what the inner city schools do not do: provide tools and credentials for meaningful work or assure admission to higher education. By either test, inner city schools do poorer than suburban schools. Two thirds of all black students attend predominantly minority or racially isolated schools.[1]

Educators seem to be in agreement that reading skills are a real measure of functional literacy as well as success in college. The major cities have developed a number of projects that provide special programs. There are remedial reading clinics, special orientation centers for newly arrived immigrants from the South, nongraded programs for overaged students and special community coordinating teams to integrate the efforts of teachers, students, parents, employers, labor organizations and social agencies.

In New York City, slum children participate in the "Higher Horizons" program. Higher Horizons[2] is aimed at bright youngsters who, for some reason, have not achieved even fundamental skills, especially in reading. St. Louis has initiated the Banneker program which is aimed at all children within a given inner city school.[3] The Right to Read program[4] was subsidized by the federal government to provide state and local school districts with auxiliary personnel to combat the war on reading. Indeed, the federal government spent approximately $6,500,496,000 for elementary and secondary education in 1979.[5] A large portion of this money was earmarked for reading programs.

[1]Nancy B. Dearman and Valena White Plisko, p.46.

[2]James Bryant Conant, Slums and Suburbs (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1971), pp.60-62.

[3]Ibid, pp.62-63.

[4]W. Vance Grant and George C. Lind, p.164.

[5]Ibid.

Nationwide, in 1977, 17% of whites, 16% of blacks and 16% of Hispanics in the 18-34 year old age group were enrolled in college.[1] In Slums and Suburbs,[2] Conant cites that 59% of the male youth between the ages of 16 and 21 were roaming the streets, unemployed and out of school. Two thirds of male dropouts were unemployed compared to one half of the total population of high school dropouts.[3] Although the exact date and city was not indicated, it is probable that these statistics are higher today.

Some urban school districts have earmarked certain high schools for the city's talented. Special programs of a highly academic nature are structured to ensure acceptance to reputable colleges. Most of these schools require high scholastic aptitude scores for entrance. More than 50% of their graduates go on to college[4]; figures substantially higher than most urban high schools. Examples cited by Conant are the Bronx High School of Science, Central High School in Philadelphia and Evanston High School in Evanston, Illinois.

Statistics on degrees awarded to minorities nationwide indicate that Blacks are underrepresented on all degree levels. While comprising 12.4% of the bachelor's degrees, 3.6% of the doctorate degrees and 4.3% of the first-professional degrees. Since two thirds of all blacks live in urban areas,[5] one may deduce that the figures for college enrollment from urban areas is somewhat smaller than the national figures cited. Persons of Hispanic origin who comprise 4.9% of the college age population represent 2.8% of the bachelor's degrees, 2.0% of the master's degrees, 1.2% of the doctorate degrees and 2.2% of the first professional degrees.[6]

[1]Nancy B. Dearman and Valena White Plisko, p.91.
[2]James Bryant Conant, p.33.
[3]Ibid, pp.34-35.
[4]Nancy B. Dearman and Valena White Plisko, p.111.
[5]Ibid, p.226.
[6]Ibid.

It is significant to note that the research through 1980 says nothing of special math programs for urban youngsters. Surely, math and science courses are legitimate prerequisites for college entrance.

Rudimentary language skills are a prerequisite for readiness in reading programs. In Young Teachers and Reluctant Learners, Hannam, Smyth and Stephenson emphasize the importance of dialogue as a prerequisite to learning to read.[1] The language we learn shapes our experiences. We structure our reality and define our place in the world through language. Regional and class differences, dialect and accent all work together to shape the way we are perceived by others as well as how we perceive ourselves. With proper language skills, we can experience sequences of events, learn to differentiate, analyze and interpret our experiences. Far too many urban youngsters are lacking in rudimentary language development. Their self concepts are particularly low. This greatly influences their performance in school. Many a violent act is initiated by students with faulty self concepts.

Loretan and Umans describe listening skills in the early grades as a direct function of later reading skill development. They classify listening habits as follows:

1. attentive listening - when there is strong interest and great motivation.
2. accurate listening - when listening is encouraged by clear-cut, clearly understood specific items for which to listen.
3. critical listening - when the pupil thinks as he listens.
4. selective listening - when a pupil listens for statements that please him or suit his purpose and tends to ignore other statements. This kind of listening can have good or bad results.
5. appreciative listening - when an emotional reaction is appropriate.

[1]Charles Hannam, Pat Smyth and Norman Stephenson, Young Teachers and Reluctant Learners, (Baltimore: Penquin Books, Inc., 1973), pp.112-138.

6. uncomprehending listening - when a pupil hears but does not comprehend. This type of listening may be traced to a number of causes: poor attention, poor vocabulary, failure to understand concepts, limited experience and background or inadequate listening readiness.
7. marginal listening - when "half listening", the pupil allows his attention to wander and the teacher must pull his attention back repeatedly. [1]

Attentive, accurate and critical listening are important for success in school. The urban youngster must develop these listening skills if he is to build vocabulary and understand concepts. Urban environmental distractions and noises greatly hinder listening skills and their development. Add to these the motivational and psychological effects that affect the student's feelings of safety and security and we have a difficult situation. According to Loretan and Umans, unstructured language practice can provide the elementary aged child with an understanding of English far beyond his ability to speak, read and write.[2]

[1] Joseph O. Loretan and Shelley Umans, Teaching the Disadvantaged, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1976), pp.52-59.

[2] Ibid, pp.52-53.

III. How Discrimination Functions in the Urban Schools

Discrimination is evident in faulty planning. As Dror says in "Urban Metapolicy and Urban Education"[1], most administrators use antiquated methods to deal with new problems or look for new strategies to deal with current problems. These methods are mostly stop gap solutions. Little is done to improve urban policymaking and decision making capabilities.

There is seldom planning in conjunction with other agencies. New housing, transportation and urban renewal projects which involve the settlement and relocation of tremendous numbers of families are not coordinated with school construction.[2] Indeed, interagency planning is a travesty.

Outdated teacher and administrator training; the lack of experience and empathy for ghetto youngsters of many people entering teaching; their racism and low expectations; the limited knowledge about how to teach, what constitutes "good" and "bad" performance and the rule ridden bureaucracies of the schools themselves are all contributing factors that produce a faulty urban system.[3]

New programs and reform strategies produce piecemeal reform that doesn't work. New programs and strategies within "old bureaucracies" get absorbed and discredited by being inefficently administered along the way.[4]

"Community control" of the school places too much of the responsibility for decision making in the hands of the uninformed and uninitiated. Cronin describes what community control means in The Control of Urban Schools.[5] These organizations control the entire operation of the schools, including expenditures of monies, principal and teacher accountability and plans for

[1]Yekenzkel Dror, "Urban Metapolicy and Urban Education" in Planning Urban Education edited by Dennis L. Toberts, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Educational Technology Publications, 1972), pp. 3-19.

[2]David Rogers, "The Failure of Inner City Schools: A Crisis in Management and Service Delivery", (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Educational Technology Publications, 1972), pp.44-56.

[3]Ibid, pp.48-52.

[4]Ibid, pp.50-53.

[5]Joseph M. Cronin, The Control of Urban Schools, (New York: The Free Press, 1973), pp.185-210.

building and rehabilitating the schools. Frequently, members of these boards are inexperienced novices who all too often get a very limited viewpoint, particularly in regard to expenditures. Teachers and administrators are extremely skeptical of community control, particularly as it relates to job performance and advancement. The debate is still alive and well in urban areas for a variety of reasons; foremost of which is the poor performance of inner city youngsters on standardized tests. In many areas, community control groups now serve as advisory groups.[1]

Unfortunately, American society and its institutions group behavior patterns and systematically produce unequal results based on race. The use of verbally oriented intelligence testing as a placement instrument in homogeneously grouped classrooms that was so popular in the 1950's and 1960's is now used to place students in the Talented and Gifted program, special high schools, and projects that foster remediation instead of ameliorating it. The effects of labeling probably have a greater impact on performance than does the actual program. This is a classic example of the Self-Fulfilling Prophecy, known to educators but seldom accounted for practically.

In terms of intelligence testing, as Jensen cites in Educability and Group Differences, IQ differences can only be discussed in terms of environmental factors, not genetic factors. Groups must be matched for social, economic, health, educational and motivational factors[2] in a far more rigorous fashion than is discussed in the literature. Indeed, there is a great deal of discussion regarding genetic differences in intelligence as it relates to race but few studies described in purely economic and social class terms. Without careful matching for these other environmental factors, differences serve no other purpose than to reinforce the Self-Fulfilling Prophecy.

[1] Cronin, p.201.

[2] Arthur Jensen, Educability and Group Differences, (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), pp.243-320.

IV. Strategies for Change

Underlying any strategy for change is the need for a positive, supportive, empathic atmosphere for all concerned. Boards of education, city and county administrators must coordinate their plans with other city agencies, particularly housing and transportation departments.

Many of the management systems in industry are directly applicable to urban school systems. Financial planning and management; facilities acquisition, development and maintenance; and personnel administration could be streamlined using an industrial systems model.[1]

Audiovisual aids and television will make possible course offerings that were, in the past, totally unavailable. Programmed learning and computer based self instruction aids will enable students to advance at their own pace. Through technology, the student will be taken out of the classroom as we know it and be placed in the world of learning.[2]

Self instructional centers can easily be located in libraries in the community. These centers can be shaped to serve a nationwide electronic library system with links to universities and research centers. There can also be facilities for independent study.

Academic performance contracting with teachers would provide a more demonstrative form of accountability. The teacher would indicate mean improvement in performance within a stipulated period of time. If the student doesn't reach this level of achievement, the teacher's contract would be altered.[3]

Rodwin and Southworth[4] suggest an Urban Service to expose youngsters to the many educational and cultural activities in the cities. The District of Columbia sponsors the "Summer in the Parks" program which takes inner city children on daily trips to different areas of the city. The Boston Redevelopment

[1]Simon Rao and Leo E. Persselin, "Changing Functions of Urban Schools: The Role of Industry" in Planning Urban Education ed. by Dennis Roberts, (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Educational Technology Publications, 1972), pp.230-244.
[2]Ibid, pp.232-233.
[3]Simon Rao and Leo E. Persselin, pp.236-237.
[4]Lloyd Rodwin and Michael Southworth, "Needed: A National Urban Service" in Planning Urban Education ed. by Dennis Roberts(Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Ed. Tech. Pub., 1972).

Authority had an outdoor information center with recorded messages of daily events, large maps and directories of local activities. Information brochures described Boston's history, culture and physical organization. Philadephia's Parkway High School used the city as the classroom. The main philosophy is that people learn best when their education is self-directed. Classes are ungraded and course requirements not too stringent.

IQ testing results would be used only to cite differences in performance based on socio-economic levels. Racial levels would never be cited. Only United States regional statistics could be compared.

Teacher training would be thoroughly revamped to expand the methods course to include programmed learning and computer based concepts. Student teachers would be placed in atmospheres totally different from the one in which they were trained only after a series of preparatory sessions on the realities of teaching in an urban setting. Sessions for student teachers would be heavily dosed with role playing and other simulated experiences consistent with the inner city schools.

In Urban Education: The Hope Factor, Gentry, Jones, Peele, Phillips, Woodbury and Woodbury describe several innovative prototypes.[1] The SASSI Prep (Street Academy of Springfield System, Inc.) in Springfield, Mass., offers college prep courses for students aged 16-60. Admission criteria include long term dropouts and former addicts. In Chicago, Christian Action Ministry offers a high school equivalency diploma. 65% of its graduates have gone on to college; a figure higher than most urban public schools. The Westside Study Center in Pasadena, California offers a community curriculum for students who have failed in public school. Sesame Street's Utilization Program meets with parents, volunteers and community groups to make their programs more accessible in areas where VHF stations aren't available.[2]

[1]Atron Gentry, Byrd Jones, Carolyn Peelle, Royce Phillips, John Woodbury and Robert Woodbury, Urban Education: The Hope Factor, (Phila.: W.B. Saunders Co., 1972), pp.48-82.
[2]Ibid, pp.61-70.

Curriculum reform is a must in any strategy for change in urban education. Science and technology have changed dramatically over the last ten years. They must be incorporated into the urban studies program. Social studies must include the important contributions of minorities and the poor in America.

Legal cases are an effective way to achieve change. Many urban schools defy laws on physical punishment, religious rights, and granting students and parents rights to due process.[1] The best known case with the most widespread effect inthe last two decades is Brown vs. The Board of Education which began in Topeka, Kansas.

Alternative schools, decentralization, computer based education and all of the aforementioned strategies can still fail in an atmosphere opposed to change and growth. As long as the schools assume their clients to be powerless, they will resist change. Therefore, self help will work to change attitudes and actions in urban schools. The Rev. Jesse Jackson's Operation Push for Excellence exemplifies the magnitude of change in parental, teacher and student attitude toward education. PUSH has taken youngsters whose parents are the hard core unemployed and transformed them into caring, learning students concerned with skill development and aspirations for the future.

[1] Atron Gentry, et.al., Urban Education: The Hope Factor, (Philadelphia: W.B. Saunders Co., 1972), p.69.

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